

Review of *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* by Mariame Kaba (Haymarket Books)

by [Esteban Kelly](#) | [Issue 11.2 \(Fall 2022\)](#), [Book Reviews](#)

ABSTRACT What if social transformation and liberation isn't about waiting for someone else to come along and save us? What if ordinary people have the power to collectively free ourselves? In this timely collection of essays and interviews, Mariame Kaba reflects on the deep work of abolition and transformative political struggle. With chapters on seeking justice beyond the punishment system, transforming how we deal with harm and accountability, and finding hope in collective struggle for abolition, Kaba's work is deeply rooted in the relentless belief that we can fundamentally change the world. As Kaba writes, "Nothing that we do that is worthwhile is done alone" (172).

KEYWORDS [Black Lives Matter](#), [justice](#), [abolition](#), [organizing](#), [accountability](#)

We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice. By Mariame Kaba. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2021. pp. 240 (paper). ISBN: 978-1-64259-525-3. US List: \$16.95.

In June 2020, as regular people flooded the streets of the world in a visceral outcry against the parade of Black death at the hands of police, voices of abolitionist leaders soared to the front pages of global media—at least for a few weeks. Their call was to defund and ultimately abolish the police and the institutions that both feed and depend on them. There's a large chasm between righteous anger at viral murders by police and the abolitionist horizon of a world in which harm is addressed within communities—and punishment, policing, and retributions are no longer necessary.

The majority of those marching were only newly awakened to the extensiveness of the prison industrial complex and its inherent racialized violence and dehumanization. Still, they clamored in good faith to amplify the calls of Black movement leaders to build a world emancipated from prisons and police. That so-called allyship had a limited half-life, with

many returning to some middle ground, unsure what it was that gripped them in the first place, and why we couldn't merely introduce some sensible reforms without trashing the whole criminal-legal system. Others stayed curious and prolonged their engagement with deeper political education to explore abolitionist frameworks, transformative justice, and more relational forms of organizing. For this latter group, the most cogent wisdom guiding this awakening came from the ever-humble Mariame Kaba, assuredly one of our most influential and pragmatic visionaries of prison abolition.

We Do This 'Till We Free Us collects the breadcrumb trail of abolitionist theory and practice that Kaba has laid out for most of the last decade—in op-eds and essays, snippets of podcast interviews, questions, lists, considerations for policy changes—to hasten the metamorphosis of our society to one where healing and justice are centered and carceral logics are no longer. The book compiles such nuggets into one omnibus resource to guide the reader on a journey wherein clarity and pragmatism belie the complexity of inhabiting a world without punishment, policing, and prisons. Getting there is not so simple. Kaba's instructional insights come from a rigorous commitment to the work of abolition; her prose is constructed upon an autobiographical latticework of political economic theory and community organizing strategy that produces the book's titular premise. This intimate, everyday work of fighting to free our people from the carceral system informs our strategy and vision for abolition itself.

Part I of the collection, "So You're Thinking about Becoming an Abolitionist," begins with the book's most recent piece. Kaba speaks directly to those beginning their journey of learning and unlearning. Up front, she counters a common pro-policing concern about "never [calling] the cops if my life is in serious danger" by positing "why do we have no other well-resourced options?" (2–3). She rightly starts by pulling the veil back on how our whole world is built around false logics of "brave and effective policing." Like the movements in which she's embedded, she pushes the reader to denaturalize our status quo.

In Part II, "There Are No Perfect Victims," Kaba probes the complicated nature of accountability and transformative justice through the cases of Marissa Alexander and Cyntoia Brown. She helps us see how an essentializing "perfect-victim" narrative can become weaponized. Kaba reverses the "cancel culture" frame to show how the real cancel culture targets poor folks of color without access to legal and social services in the face of retaliation from the state or bosses.

Abolition does not imply a shirking back from accountability. By Part III, "The State Can't Give Us Transformative Justice," we find Kaba urging us to carve out some distance between official outcomes of criminal legal proceedings and our own sense of transformative justice, even in cases of "victory." As a prominent example of not reducing

accountability to any one model or approach, the book considers the response to murder at the hands of the police and FBI. Kaba points to ways that even within the existing system, our movements need to pluralize demands for accountability to “many possible collective responses to a clear injustice” (63). She and essay coauthor Andrea Ritchie affirm that we can “fully support demands for accountability for Breonna [Taylor]’s death,” without defaulting to prosecution and imprisonment (63). They list a series of responses from uprisings: firing the officers, banning such officers from holding positions of power, demanding that the family receive compensation and healing, and, of course, defunding the police.

This sentiment bridges to Part IV, where Kaba outlines “Reforms for and Against Abolition.” If there is a nucleus of the book, it is surely this section’s structuring frameworks. It opens with her well-nigh viral 2014 *Truthout* list of “[Police Reforms You Should Always Oppose.](https://truthout.org/articles/police-reforms-you-should-always-oppose/)” <
<https://truthout.org/articles/police-reforms-you-should-always-oppose/>> She then explores several different contexts ranging from policing in the nineteenth century, the school-to-prison pipeline in Chicago, and the spectacles of police militarization and mass surveillance. In an interview with Jeremy Scahill, she reminds us that prison itself is a reform: We haven’t always had prisons. They emerged “as a reaction to corporal punishment” (72). Earlier, she mentions that for most people first encountering ideas of abolition, “prisons, policing, and surveillance are part of a natural order that simply cannot be undone” (21).

Kaba has the reader consider how strange it is that police are at the center of our society. Kaba lays this out plainly in her reprinted June 2020 *New York Times* op-ed where she states “Police officers don’t do what you think they do. They spend most of their time responding to noise complaints, issuing parking and traffic citations, and dealing with other non-criminal issues” (14). To put this in perspective, Kaba draws on the work of Alex Vitale, the coordinator of the Policing and Social Justice Project at Brooklyn College, specifying that “the vast majority of police officers make one felony arrest a year. If they make two, they’re cop of the month” (14).

As Kaba reminds us throughout the book, such context is obscured by a carceral state that frantically champions police as the frontline of a criminal legal system, feeding the prison-industrial complex in the name of security. Noise violations and traffic citations have very little to do with the propagandized premise of policing which—upon closer inspection—could easily be addressed by alternative means. Kaba shows how that point is often glossed over when politicians and so-called police unions seamlessly swap out “security” for “safety” in the public justification for their presence and ongoing depletion of municipal coffers (95). Safety, being a matter distinguished from security, would need to account for deeper problems of harm and violent transgression. It just so happens that Kaba’s insights

are exactly what would allow us to get at the roots of safety—positing that our world would indeed be safer if we did away with ineffectual punitive structures and re-centered our lives around a theory and practice of transformative justice.

The collection of essays, interviews, and reprinted conversations from her clear articulation of this politics introduces readers to a series of portals—glimpses into the sundry worlds heralded by abolitionist practice. But these portals are not just about what's on the other side. Kaba's vision is indispensable precisely insofar as it remains firmly anchored in the conditions in which we find ourselves. Here, she reminds us to balance our fraught conditions and bleak outlooks with rigorous organizing; hope is a discipline and solidarity is a verb (26).

In Part V, "We Must Practice and Experiment," Kaba emphasizes the importance of pairing abolitionist theory with on-the-ground organizing. She names "abolitionist care" as a frame for mutual aid and uplifts defense campaigns that help more people realize how individual stories can be emblematic of systemic injustice (111). She discerns that even if we know intrinsically that Black lives matter, an abolitionist practice has to *make* Black lives matter by "[defining] the vision" through direct demands in relation to specific and urgent issues (105).

Part VI, the aptly titled "Transforming How We Deal with Harm and Violence," articulates the discipline that a principled abolitionist politics necessitates, e.g. sitting with "failure and mistakes [as] part of a process" (142). Here, Kaba frames transformative justice as an attempt to deconstruct dichotomies, such as those between "victims and perpetrators" or what is and isn't "restorative" or "transformative." She describes how our communities instead "[try] to figure out how we respond to violence and harm in a way that doesn't cause more violence and harm." The work of transformative justice is "many different kinds of things, to many different kinds of people, who use it many different kinds of ways" (149).

Her blueprint—transforming ourselves, experimenting with new collective structures, reducing contact between people and the criminal-legal system, and changing everything (beyond just the criminal-legal system)—gets at the multiple scales we each have to simultaneously organize on (4-5). Considering W. E. B. Du Bois' "abolition democracy" today brings us back to the fundamental political-economic questions of ownership and control. Similarly, Kaba's call to change everything speaks to the demand for a new economy implicit within abolitionism—an economy that also decenters carceral logics and centers collective care. Recent fascist violence, book banning, and white scaremongering of critical race theory should remind us that, absent collective political-economic power to put up a fight, mobilizations like the 2020 uprisings will recede and face repressive backlashes reminiscent of those of the 1890s and 1970s. Current conditions only heighten the need to build the kind of abolitionist collective power Kaba describes.

In Part VII, Kaba concludes with the reminder “Community matters. Collectivity matters” (175). She amplifies a tenet from her father, “Everything Worthwhile is Done with Other People,” contrasting between the disposition of an activist—meaning someone who broadly acts on a political issue—versus an organizer, whose actions must inherently be accountable to someone else (180). The question comes down to the process of “building a million different little experiments” (166), and as a tweet she cites from @ZenMarxist asserts, “a fundamental expression of trust in the power of conscious collective effort” (167).

While the challenge to change ourselves and to change everything is overwhelming (a challenge which will undoubtedly necessitate deeper collective care), there is both no greater joy and no other option than the work of affirming life. Thanks to *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, visions of a world without police and prisons are refined with examples of tools and approaches for getting there. What Kaba makes abundantly clear through her words and actions is that there is no way but forward, together, toward the work.

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